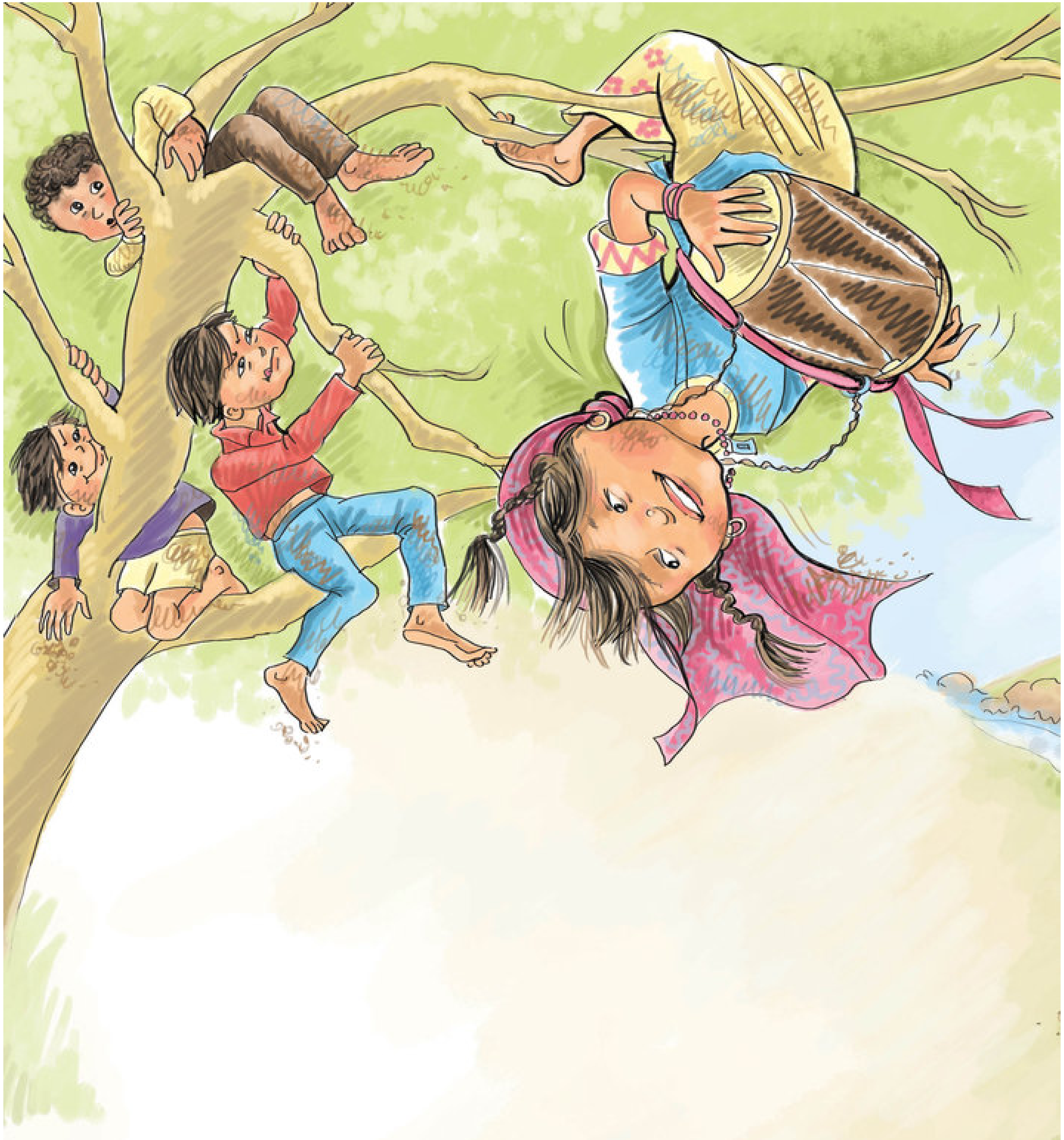


A Book in Every Child's Hand

Level 4

Chipko takes root

Author: Jeyanthi Manokaran
Illustrator: Jeyanthi Manokaran



Dhoom Dadaka!
Dhoom Dadaka!
Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom!

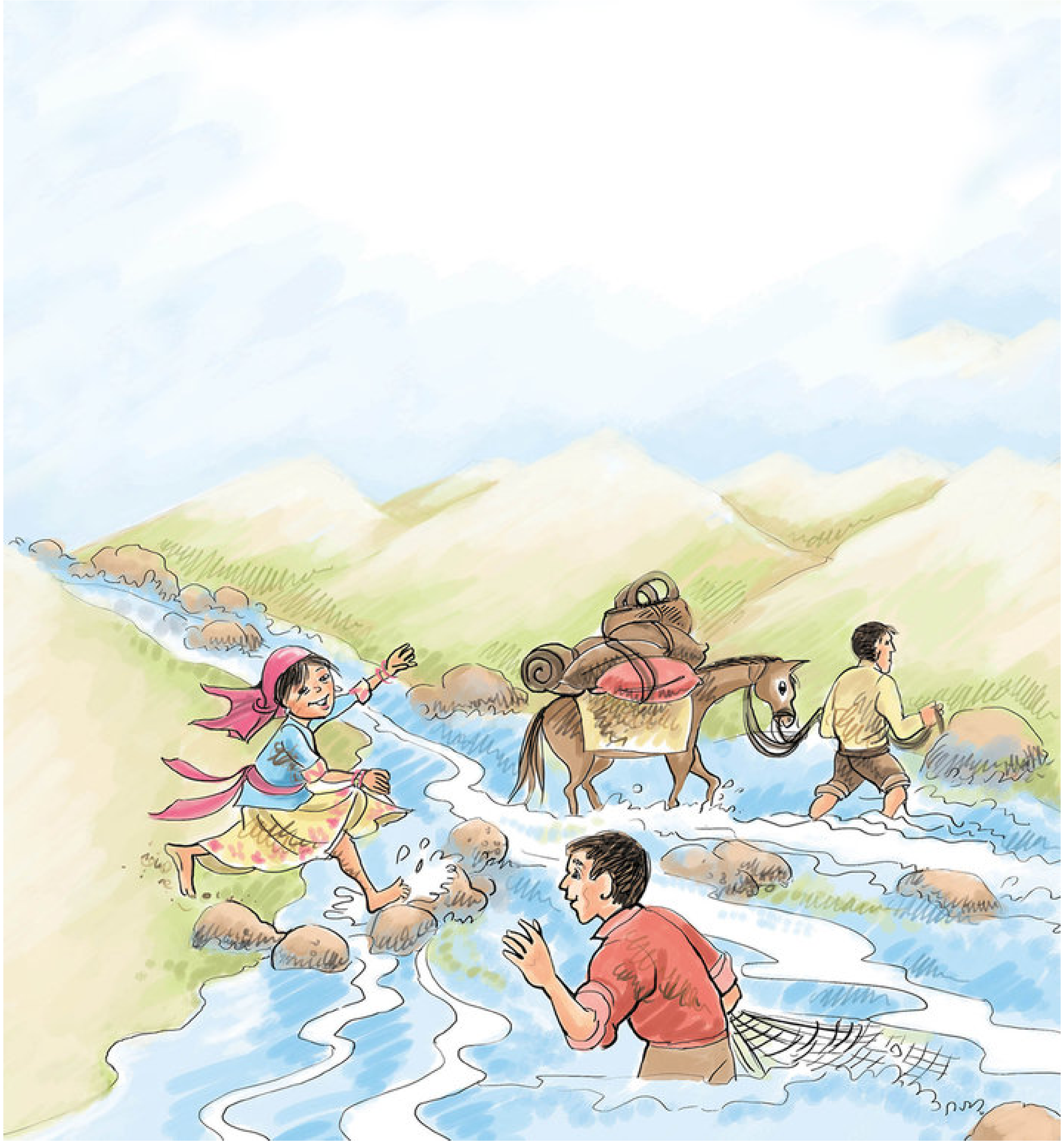
High up in the branches of her tree, Dichi plays on her dholak. Her three brothers clamber up the same sturdy tree while their sheep jostle and bleat on the meadow below.

“Dichi!” echoes Dada’s voice through the chir, pine, deodar and ash trees.
“Come. We must visit your grandmother across the river. Boys, bring the sheep home safely.”

“Can’t we come too?” begs Shyam.

“Next time,” says Dada firmly. “Dichi will stay on there to nurse Grandma. She is very sick now.”





Dada guides their mule through knee-deep river water. Nimble as a mountain goat, Dichi tucks her skirt to skip on the rocks. Her toes tingle in the chill waters, until she slips and tumbles in with a splash.

“Careful!” warns Chacha, who is fishing nearby.

In a sudden surge, the river swells and roars about them in a furious flash flood. Chacha rushes over to grab Dichi by the arms.

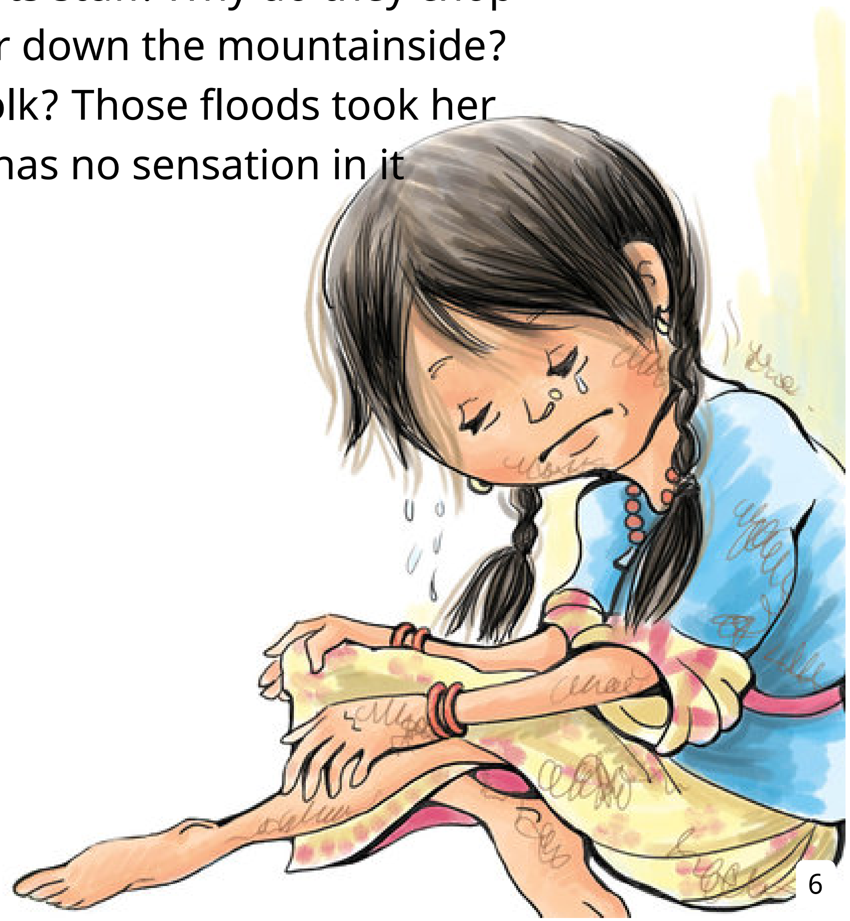
Her left leg is caught beneath a rolling boulder. Dada's figure is a blur – his voice muffled by the raging waters. Caught in the current, the mule swims and staggers to the other side, its burden toppled and swept away.

Chacha can barely keep his balance in the deluge, as he tries to extricate Dichi's leg from below the obstinate rock. Drenched in muddy water, he musters all his strength to yank Dichi out. His powerful shoulders carry her back to Ma who crouches, sobbing over her bedraggled daughter. Sharp needles of pain shoot up Dichi's left leg. Enveloped by a fit of trembling, she faints.



Leaving Dichi with her horrified Ma, Chacha charges back for Dada. But Dada never returns. Cold fingers of fear clutch at Dichi's heart when they bring his body home from the river.

Dichi hears of the sports goods company that felled their chir, pine, deodar and ash trees to make cricket bats and other sports stuff. Why do they chop our forests? Can't they see the landslides thunder down the mountainside? The fierce flash floods that carry away the poor folk? Those floods took her Dada...and the power in Dichi's left leg. She now has no sensation in it below the knee.





Can Dichi ever forget those icy river waters? She still feels them block her ears, leak into her nose, blur her eyes and close over her head.



But no. Chacha says she must think of the good things...dwell on the positive. Courage wells up with a glowing warmth that melts away her fears. She still has Ma and her brothers. Chacha and Chachi care for all of them. They have no children of their own.

Dichi loves her Chacha like her own Dada, but is upset when she overhears Chachi say to Ma, “Your brother is a good man. But his gambling is a habit that can make or break you – and now we’re going downhill...”

‘Chacha – a gambler? Oh no! It can’t be so!’

Days pass. Dichi and her family fall into a new routine.



Dichi sits on her ash tree glancing down at the two rugged crutches that lie on the grass below... Chacha made them for her from her mighty ash.

“My branches are thin and fat, long and short,” whispers her ash, “but I’m strong.”

Dichi climbs higher to peer into a bird’s nest. She trails her fingers after a row of ants, and sniffs the cool scent of ash leaves.

‘You’re MY ash tree. Chacha says I’m just like you, sturdy as a yak. With these crutches, I’ll be strong and fierce as a Yeti.’







“Hey Dichi! Everyone’s at the meeting!” yells Shyam.

Quick as lightning, Dichi slides down, picks up her crutches and follows him to the vast shady tree where the villagers gather around Gauri, the village elder.

“We may be illiterate, but we are wise folk,” says Gauri. “We will not allow them to auction our precious trees to any company. When Chand, the contractor comes with his axemen, we will go out into the forests and hug the chir, pine, deodar and ash trees. There will be no violence.”

The villagers troop into the forest chanting their Chipko slogans. Dichi grabs her dholak to boom along with the chant of children who bounce around like rubber balls.

Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom Dadaka!
Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom!





“What do these forests bear?” shouts Dichi.

“Soil, water and pure air,” chorus the children, following her with a hop and a jump.



But a cluster of uniformed axemen is there before them. Contractor Chand's bulky form looms above, barking out orders to methodically mark the chir, pine, deodar and ash trees for auction with a chalky white X. The villagers clamour around them in fury. They bear down upon the axemen. They brandish their dholaks filling the forest with Chipko songs.

"Let us protect and plant the trees,
Go awaken the villages and drive away the axemen."



Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom Dadaka!
Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom!

Contractor Chand gives an evil grin as he and his axemen troop into a bus and drive away.

The next day, there is a hubbub as the village men get ready for a long drive down the mountainside. Trucks are sent by the government for the menfolk to view the film – a sudden treat that can't be ignored, as movies are rarely seen in these parts.

The women are busy weaving. The village school is abuzz. Children learn new Chipko slogans, draw chir, pine, deodar and ash trees on their slates, beat on their dholaks and dance.

"Soil ours, water ours, ours are these forests too,
Our forefathers raised these, it is we who must protect these too."

Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom Dadaka!
Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom!

After school, Dichi and her brothers take the sheep into the forest to graze. Along with the other village kids, they hug the chir, pine, deodar and ash trees. Their cheerful voices fade as the sun dips into the horizon and the children head back to the village with bundles of firewood on their heads.

Dichi lingers to close her eyes and lean on her favourite tree. Its feathery leaves calm her, the smooth bark cools her cheeks as it seems to whisper to her.





‘No one must take away my ash!’ thinks Dichi firmly.

Time stands still. All is right with the world.

But these tranquil trees are all aflutter when from their bosom parrots squawk and take wing in a flurry of green feathers. Squirrels burst out of the undergrowth in a frenzy. With a screech of brakes, a bus jolts to a stop beneath the cliff. Spattered with mud, it is enveloped in a cloud of dust. Dichi peers through the curtain of leaves.

Men troop out in single file. Their khaki uniforms are scruffy, their axes glint as they head towards her forest with its chir, pine, deodar and ash trees. Burly Chand follows. Their footsteps echo down the mountainside.

'Help! My ash! They can't cut my ash!' Dichi slips off the branch to slither down the steep mountainside. Panting, she throws her crutches over the gentle slope of green, to roll after them.







Rumble, tumble, thump! Rumble tumble thump!

Dichi's heart booms like her dholak.

Dhoom Dadaka!
Dhoom Dadaka!
Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom!

'I need help!' Dichi flounders, gropes for her crutches and totters home.

"Ma!" she gasps. Ma rushes out to wrap protective arms about her as she crumbles like charred wood in a bonfire.

“Ma! My ash! The – the – They’re –– cutting it!”

“Who, child? Talk slowly. Here – drink this water.”

“They c–came in a big bus with axes! So many men. Huge men with sharp axes, Ma!”

“Oh no! It’s the contractor’s men come to chop our trees! Quick! We have to do something.”

“You wait here. I’ll gather everyone,” says Dichi catching her breath and squaring her shoulders.

Women and children rush to rally around with dholaks.

“We’ve got to do something. Contractor Chand tricked our menfolk into going away!” Ma says, wringing the edge of her phantu. “How do we stop them without our menfolk?”

“We’ll show them! But remember – absolutely no violence,” says the village elder, Gauri who is Ma’s best friend.

Dichi’s heart booms along with her dholak.

Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom Dadaka!
Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom!

“Chipko!” she yells.
“Hug the trees!” holler the women and children
till their throats ache for a drink of hot buttered tea.



The forest throbs with the wails of chir, pine, deodar and ash trees.

“What do the forests bear?” shouts Dichi, raising her fist high.

“Soil, water and pure air!” chorus the women and children.

The X that marks every tree to be cut, feels like a gash – a wound that will never heal. My Ash! What will I do without you? Dichi’s trembling fingers scratch at the bark to erase the X.

“You can’t cut my ash,” she says fiercely, her arms wrapped around her tree.

“Move out,” rasps Contractor Chand, pulling her away roughly.

Dichi whirls to stamp her feet. Her eagle eyes scrutinize the axemen who crowd around. They look tired and wary. As her gaze fixes on one figure hiding behind a tree, his eyes drop to the ground.

Dichi’s eyes widen, “Chacha – you too?”



There’s a hush in the woods. Chacha slumps to drop his axe with a clink.

“I have a gambling debt. I am out of work...” says Chacha lamely.

Dichi and her brothers rush to hug him.

“Chacha, we’ll work and help you repay your debts! I can weave a shawl and sell it!” says Dichi.

“I’ll work at the soap unit,” says Ram.

“I’ll work at the water mill!” says Shyam.

Chacha’s head droops, a teardrop glistens in his eye.
He throws off the shirt of his uniform, picks up Dichi’s dholak.

Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom Dadaka!
Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom!



“What do the forests bear?” boom Chacha and Dichi.

“Soil, water and pure air!” chorus the women and children.

“You foolish girl! These forests bear timber, resin and foreign exchange!” cuts in Contractor Chand. “MEN, chop down those trees at once! Every one of them – chir, pine, deodar and ash!”

“No! No! No! Pleeeease don’t!” says Dichi holding on to her tree.
“The trees are our saviours!”

“She’s right,” says Chacha.
“She lost her Dada in that flood.”

An axeman opens burning palms to drop his axe. Another axe clinks down and another… until one by one the axemen troop out of the forest.

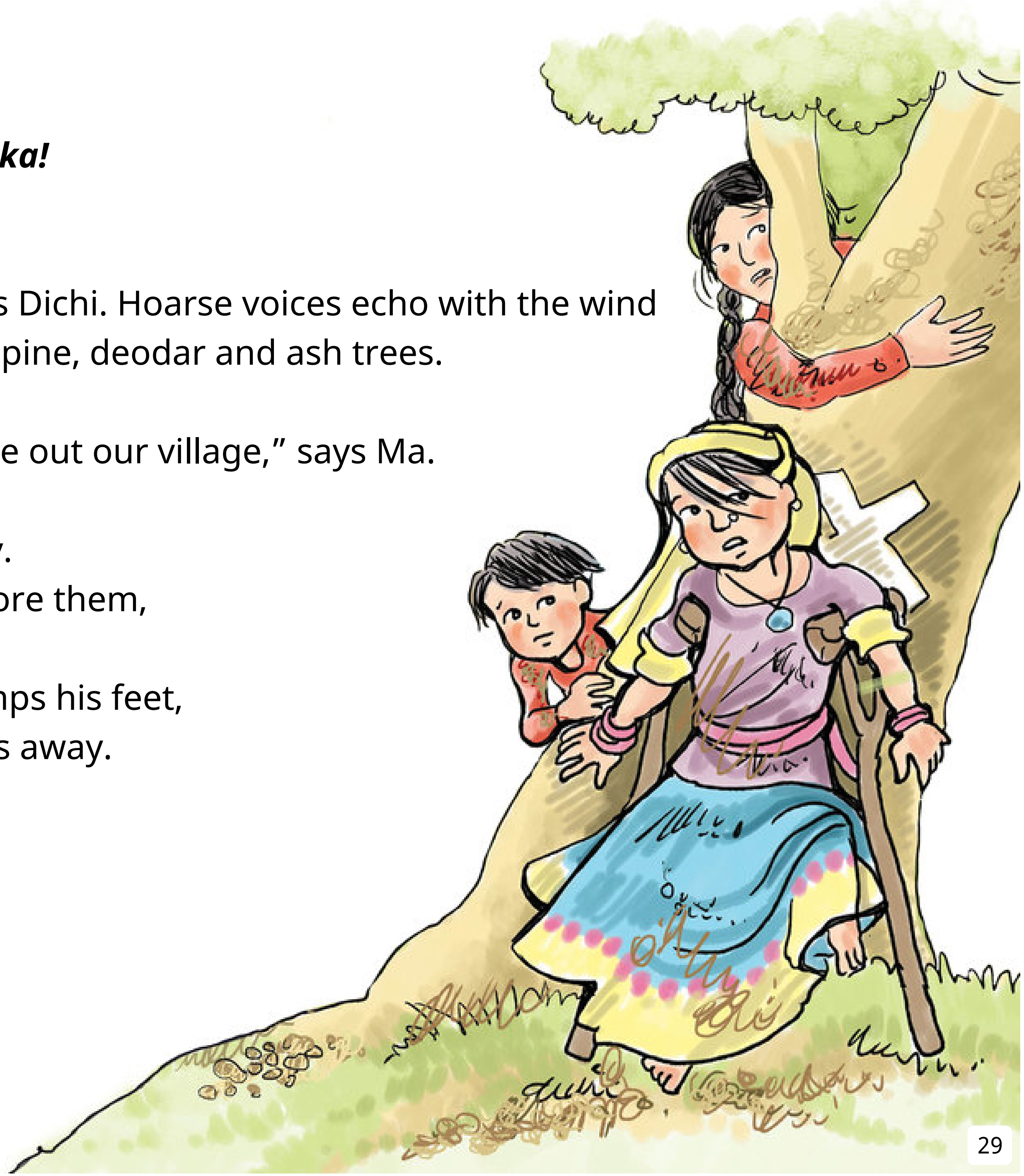


Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom Dadaka!
Dhoom Dadaka! Dhoom!

“Chipko! Hug the trees!” cries Dichi. Hoarse voices echo with the wind that whines through the chir, pine, deodar and ash trees.

“Cut this forest and you’ll wipe out our village,” says Ma.

A bulky form blots out the sky.
Contractor Chand towers before them,
looking like thunder.
Shaking an angry fist, he stamps his feet,
turns on his heel and marches away.





Squeezing her hands together, Dichi takes a deep breath.

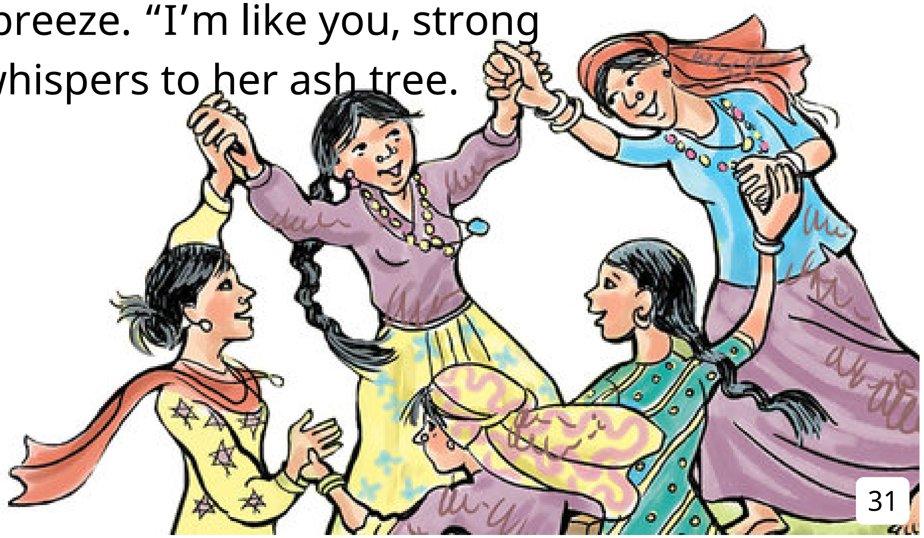
She can’t believe it – all the axemen have gone!

“We did it!” says Ma. “We’ll take our Chipko Movement to every part of India.”

“Chipko! Hug the trees!” cry the women and children.

Toes tap, feet thump. Hand in hand, they swing into a joyous victory dance.

The ash sways in the breeze. Dichi rests her cheek against its cool bark. She feels its feathery leaves rustle in the evening breeze. “I’m like you, strong and fierce like a Yeti…sturdy as a yak,” Dichi whispers to her ash tree.







Glossary

Chacha - Uncle

Chipko - To stick to, hug

Dada - Father

Dholak - Drum

Ma - Mother

Phantu - Bhotiya tribal women wear this shawl on the head tucked behind to make two pockets.

Yak - Long-haired domestic cattle

Yeti - An imaginary giant ape or an abominable snowman believed to live in the Himalaya mountains of Nepal and Tibet.

Bibliography is a list of published reference material used by an author to write a story. Here is a short bibliography for this book:

1. *The Unquiet Woods* by Ramachandra Guha
2. *Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Gaura Devi, and the Chipko Movement* by Mark Shepard
3. *Among the Bhotiyas and their Neighbors b*y E C M Browne
4. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcwY04s_mlM&feature=related
   - CNN IBN – Chandi Prasad Bhatt
5. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXnAcTS8Ais&feature=related

- Nanda Devi Campaign Bali Devi Speaks

**“Forestry is not about trees.
It is about people.”**

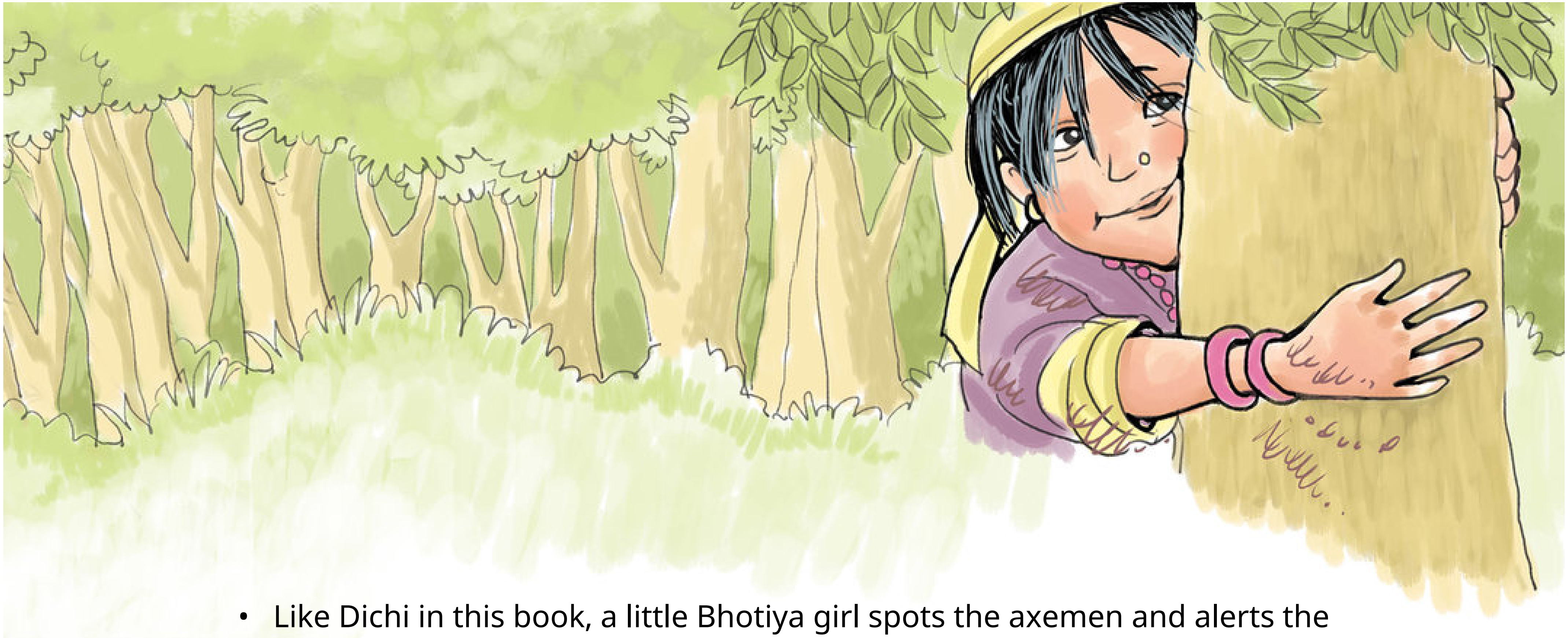
- Jack Westoby, author of *The Purpose of Forests*

- The Bhotiya tribe live high in the Himalaya mountains of India. They love and protect the forests because they depend on them for firewood, tools and building houses.

- In 1970 floods occur in Alaknanda when the forests are cleared, sweeping away houses, bridges, cattle and thousands of people. The Bhotiyas know they have to save their forests so they adopt the Chipko Movement which promotes non-violence. An illiterate woman, Gaura Devi, a tribal leader from Chamoli District, mobilizes the women of her region to protect their forests. Some consider this an eco-feminist movement where women are actively involved.

- In the Alaknanda Valley, Chandi Prasad Bhatt is a humble social worker who teaches the people to embrace the trees and save them from the axemen. Like Mahatma Gandhi, he doesn’t use violence. He encourages tribals to develop their local industries without disturbing the forest wealth.

- “Ecology is permanent economy,” says Chipko leader, Sunderlal Bahuguna, who continues the movement to fight the felling of forests.



- Like Dichi in this book, a little Bhotiya girl spots the axemen and alerts the village women who march into the forest with shouts of Chipko slogans. Without violence, they block the axemen from cutting the trees.

- In 1980, the Government of India passes a law to protect these forests. This is one of the first important environmental movements in India.

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Chipko takes root
(English)

Here is a story set in the hills that shows what bravery and grit can accomplish. Dichi, a brave Bhotiya girl takes part in the Chipko movement to save her beloved trees. Everybody in her village knows that trees give them all the important things in their life. Rapid deforestation in the Himalayan region of Alaknanda river caused floods in the 1970s and gave birth to a movement to save trees by hugging them. Read this heartwarming tale to learn the power of collective action as seen through the eyes of young Dichi.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.